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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000260

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SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE, MAY 10, 2007: REACTION TO SECRETARY RICE'S STATEMENTS; ELECTION ASSESSMENT TEAM TO START WORK; TROOPS IN POLICE STATIONS, POLICE IN CUSTODY; CHAUDHRY AGAIN ALLEGES 2006 ELECTION WAS RIGGED

Classified By: CDA Ted Mann, per 1.5 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary: Secretary Rice's comments condemning the coup in Fiji received considerable press play in Fiji and elicited a relatively mild response from the interim government. The EU warned the interim government that failure to honor commitments it made last month in Brussels could lead to significant aid cuts. The Pacific Island Forum and Fiji agreed on the composition of a four-member technical team to assess when Fiji would be ready for new elections. Members include the former chairman of Fiji's Boundaries Commission, who recently stated that preparations would take at least three years. The RFMF announced that soldiers would be posted at all police stations to help combat crime. A senior police official involved in pre-coup investigations into Commodore Bainimarama's action was detained on an order from the new anti-corruption commission and charged with taking bribes. Interim Finance Minister Chaudhry said an audit undertaken by his ministry casts doubts on the results of the 2006 election. The evidence Chaudhry produced to back up that claim appears inconclusive. End Summary.

#### Reaction to Secretary Rice's Statement

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12. (SBU) Secretary Rice's comments at the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders condemning the coup in Fiji received considerable press play in all local media May 8 and 9. Referring to the Secretary's comment that "the Pacific cannot devolve into an area where strongmen unilaterally decide the fate of their country," Interim PM Bainimarama reportedly responded that, "the fate of the United States of America was decided by strong men 200 years ago." "We have made good progress since December 5 last year and we have shown our commitment to the restoration of parliamentary democracy." Bainimarama concluded that, "Ms. Rice should have noted the level of corruption concerned and that we are working towards good democracy and good governance in Fiji." Parmesh Chand, Permanent Secretary in the PM's Office, said the U.S. stance "was to be expected, ..but what they failed to note and realize is the commitment of work in progress ...to take the country forward. It would be good if that work was recognized because it's recognized by the Forum process and the EU."

#### EU Warns Fiji Again

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13. (C) Roberto Ridolfi, head of the EU office in Suva, held a press conference May 9, during which he warned the interim government (IG) that EU aid would be cut if the IG did not live up to its commitments on returning Fiji to democracy and

human rights. Ridolfi, the UK High Commissioner, and the French Ambassador also met privately with Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Ross Ligairi and other IG officials to express their concern that Fiji is being less than proactive about meeting its commitments. We understand the diplomats took note of the IG decision to keep the state of emergency in place at least through May 31, despite its commitment to end the state of emergency "in May."

#### Election Assessment Team to Start Next Week

14. (C) Andrew Martin, Charge at the Australian High Commission, told us Fiji and the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) working group on Fiji agreed May 9 on a four-person technical team to assess when elections in Fiji will be feasible. The working group will start work next week and hopes to complete its report by the end of June.

15. (C) Australia and New Zealand had initially objected to Fiji's request to add a fourth member to the team, Barry Sweetman, chairman of Fiji's Boundaries Commission prior to the 2006 elections. Sweetman had previously publicly stated that it would take at least three years for Fiji to prepare for a new election. According to Martin, Australia and New Zealand accepted Sweetman to avoid an impasse, since no other PIF countries opposed Fiji's request. Australia and New Zealand hope that if the other members of the technical team can show that Fiji can be ready for an election within two years, if not sooner, Sweetman will go along. Sweetman will be co-chair of the assessment team. The other co-chair is Paul Harris, from New Zealand. The remaining members are Canadian Bruce Hatch and University of South Pacific academic Kesaia Seniloli, from Fiji.

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#### Soldiers Placed at Police Stations

16. (SBU) RFMF spokesman Neumi Leweni announced May 7 that "four or five" soldiers would be placed at every police station in Fiji to assist the police combat crime. Leweni did not say whether the soldiers will be armed (police officers are not armed). According to the RFMF, more than 300 soldiers will take part in the anti-crime campaign. The military will also reportedly monitor emergency calls to the police and will help the police respond. Fiji's major newspapers welcomed the development, stating that drastic steps are needed to combat a recent rise in violent crime. There are 31 police stations and 54 police posts in Fiji.

#### Police Official who Investigated Bainimarama Is Detained, Charged

17. (SBU) Assistant Commissioner of Police Josaia Rasiga (Crime) was detained May 8, and arraigned on corruption charges May 10 based on orders issued from the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption. This appears to be the first use of the Commission's broad powers to detain and interrogate suspects. Charges of receiving illegal payments from a businessman were filed against Rasiga May 10. He pleaded not guilty. Rasiga was in charge of all police criminal investigations. He supervised the investigation into treason charges against Commodore Bainimarama prior to the coup.

#### Chaudhry Alleges (Again) that 2006 Election was Rigged

18. (SBU) Interim Finance Minister Chaudhry issued a press statement May 8, stating that a "special audit" by the Ministry of Finance had called the results of the 2006 national election into question (Chaudhry's Labor Party lost that election to the SDL Party). The audit report found that more than 600,000 unused ballot papers were unaccounted for, he said. The report also found that the Elections Office failed to keep an adequate record of ballot papers issued to polling stations or ensure proper reports were filled by

election officials at polling stations. Chaudhry said that "the mere fact that 665,256 unused ballot papers are unaccounted for, is in itself sufficient to raise serious questions about the credibility and integrity of the 2006 elections." Chaudhry said he had handed the findings of the special audit to the Fiji Commission Against Corruption for investigation.

¶9. (SBU Former Supervisor of Elections Semesa Karavaki vigorously denied Chaudhry's charges and questioned the credibility of any audit completed by Chaudhry's staff. He said that his office had undertaken its own audit, which was left uncompleted because of the coup. (Note: It appears likely the Finance Ministry drew upon this document in completing its "special audit.") The Fiji Times published a scathing attack on Chaudhry in its May 10 editorial, saying the number of unused and unaccounted for ballots is meaningless and that Chaudhry's charges were merely "political hot air."

¶10. (C) Comment: Chaudhry's allegations are not very new or very convincing. Fiji's has a complicated voting system, with each voter casting at least two ballots. Voters also have the right to choose from a number of polling stations. Far more ballots are printed, therefore, than are actually cast. The failure to account for all ballot papers was noted in the final report of the EU Observation Mission to the 2006 Fiji elections. The report states that "the high number of papers in circulation increased the difficulties in accounting for all the unused ballot papers. However, there were no indications of any abuse or manipulation in connection with the high number of printed ballot papers."  
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